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Meters have the record to exorcise your sorrow

It is not easy to find Fire On The Bayou, the new record by the purest and most distinctive rhythm 'n' blues band in the world, The Meters.

Their records are rarely promoted, you never hear them on the radio, and their album covers are so out there in left field — appealing only to cultists and fans like myself — that they invariably go unnoticed.

This is the case with Fire On The Bayou, which may well be the most brilliant pop evocation of the richest traditional source of music in America — New Orleans, birthplace of jazz and the blues.

The Meters are the 'house band' at the Crescent City's Sea-Saint Studio, which is half-owned by Allen Toussaint, who produces their records and uses them on his other productions, including popular successes by Labelle (Lady Marmelade) and Dr. John (Right Place Wrong Time), and nonsellers like his own superb Southern Nights.

Toussaint grew up as an apprentice and sideman of those seminals of New Orleans music, Professor Longhair and Fats Domino. He started producing hits in 1960 for such singers as Ernie K-Doe, Irma Thomas and Clarence Frogman Henry, and he adopted the Meters as the backup band on such taxi classics as Workin' In The Coalmine and Get Outta My Life Woman by Lee Dorsey.

APPRENTICE

He produced some big dance hits for the group in the late 1960s — including The Chicken Strut and Cissy Struttin' — but they've stayed in the background, releasing records irregularly.

All this has resulted in a cult-like status that attracted Paul McCartney to record parts of Venus In Mars at Sea-Saint and the Rolling Stones to use the Meters as the opening act on many dates on their recent American tour.

They are special because, among all the wimpy black falsetto harmonies and tired wah wah disco beat, the Meters feature a strong, subtle percussive sound; they slap their instruments with a funky reasonance you just don't hear much of these days. They do not load up their sound with gadgetry; it's loose and happy-go-lucky, filled naturally with the musical winds that blow into New Orleans.

The Meters' name refers to their unique rhythm, a direct descendent of the "second line" rhythms of the traditional brass funeral bands. On the way to the funerals, the bands played mournful dirges, but on the way back the "second line" tripled the tempo to exorcise their sorrows.

SYNCOPATED

The Meters blend this into a cleverly syncopated textured beat, so tightly performed that they can color the sound by delaying or suggesting polyrhythms. The group also conveys a clear Ray Charles gospel influence.

The New Orleans portrayed in Fire On The Bayou has music in the air, a place where "it takes a cool cat to blow a horn", where "combos play with a mambo beat", where "gris-gris and crawfish soup" go hand in hand with "bons temps roulees".

One song, Talkin' Bout New Orleans, elaborates with rapid-fire local patois riding the archetypal strut rhythms, and is followed by a more informal party atmosphere. They All Ask'd For You, which amazingly combines an oompah stride rhythm with latin-flavored trumpet blasts and "bluegrass" electric guitar.

DISTINCT

The members of The Meters each work distinct tasks, with a rhythm section of drummer Joseph "Zig" Modeliste and bassist George Porter and lead colorations by guitarist Leo Nocentelli and pianist organist Art Neville. Together their sound is unswelded; they're so expert and experienced that they never play throw-away lines. In this respect, they are reminiscent of the great mid-1960s soul group Booker T. & the MGs: What they leave out is almost as important as what they play.

Other black "funk" groups, such as Sly Stone and the Philly Sound, have overshadowed them, but the Meters refuse to compromise with sleazy commercializations. They are very comfortable with their music, indicated by a sense of humor as basic as the delicious double entendre of Can You Do Without?

Can you do without your mother
Can you do without your papa
Can you do without hum-mo-ny
Just stick around — you'll see!

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